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Ann Kenyon circa 1925. (author's collection)

Ann Kenyon, Lady Magician and Card Manipulator



MICHAEL CLAXTON

THE STORY OF ANN KENYON IS A TRUE RARITY: HOW MANY FEMALE sleight-of-hand artists were working in the 20s and 30s? Other than Talma (who would soon retire) and Suzy Wandas (who performed mostly in Europe at the time), there would be little competition during that era for an American woman specializing in coins and cards, especially one who – like Kenyon – could do back and front palms with both hands at the same time. Yet because her career lasted only eight years and took place primarily in the rough-and-tumble world of outdoor carnivals, Ann Kenyon has been completely forgotten by magic history. While there's no need to insist that she was one of the greats, surely she deserves her moment.

Magicians and carny folk who thumbed through *Billboard* and *The Linking Ring* in 1925 would have seen photos of a 22-year-old with thick blonde hair done up like Clara Bow. She would be dressed in a horse-riding costume, with a long jacket, ascot, slacks, and boots. With a confident smile and card fans in both hands, she looked like a sophisticate stepping off the tracks at Churchill Downs, just ready to bet on poker hands instead of horse races. She seemed very much the kind of performer who could hold an audience in the palm (front or back) of her hand. No one would guess she was a coal miner's daughter from Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania.

Johanna Korenkewicz would not have lasted long performing under that name. Her parents were Polish immigrants from Russia

who had come to the United States in the 1880s. Her father Victor (1878–1935) made his living working in the coal mines that had anchored Mount Carmel's livelihood for nearly a century. He and his wife Frances (1866–1916) had three sons and three daughters. Johanna was the youngest, born on February 25, 1903. As a teenager she went by the much simpler name Anna Brown and worked in a cigar factory. She later told *The Linking Ring* that when she was young, she saw different magicians and took a liking to magic. Simply by watching them, she claimed, she developed a knack for picking up on the methods: "Whenever she sees someone do a sleight, and does not know how it is done, she keeps at it until she finds a way to do it."

Her narrative of plucky determination sounds similar to stories told by Dell O'Dell to the press, and there is no way to know how seriously to take Ann Kenyon's account of her magical inspiration. Nor is it known when and where she met Charles W. Kenyon, who would become her husband and manager. Born in Iowa in 1872, Charles was thirty-one years older. For over twenty years he had trained and raced "trotters and pacers," having set a number of equestrian records. While that certainly explains his choice of performance costume for his wife, it does not explain why a vibrant young woman was attracted to a man over fifty. Perhaps it was the romance of the carnival. Charles Kenyon now operated carnival concessions, traveling up and down the East Coast with a cookhouse (where the carny personnel often ate) and various games. The lure of getting out of coal country in the middle of the roaring twenties may have been powerful.

Ann Kenyon clearly preferred grease paint to coal dust. She began appearing in the show-business press in February 1925. Based out of nearby Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, she called herself the area's "one great female magician," which was a safe bet. Charles Colta Jones (1890–1973) was also from Harrisburg, where he and his wife Minnie performed as "Colta and Colta." They may or may not have been among the magicians who inspired Ann to take up sleight-of-hand, but during the winter of that year, she gained great popularity entertaining audiences at clubs and parties throughout Pennsylvania. She was already getting a reputation as a card manipulator.

Her claim to be one of three female magicians in the entire country was an exaggeration to be sure, though not terribly far off. She was no doubt referring to Adelaide Herrmann and Emma Reno as her



Ann Kenyon's business card, recto (author's collection)



Ann Kenyon's business card, verso (author's collection)

colleagues, or perhaps Ada Schorsch (1874–1940), a pro from Newton, Pennsylvania. Ann Kenyon's show consisted of standard effects, but presented with her own distinctive flair. She produced flags, multiplied billiard balls, tore and restored strips of paper, made productions from a Phantom Tube, performed a haunted handkerchief routine, penetrated solid through solid and did effects with sand and water. The card segment of her program included flourishes and demonstrations of front and back palming, simultaneously in both hands. The *Harrisburg Sunday Courier* remarked that "As a card manipulator, she is in a class by herself. Every moment is perfect, and she goes through her routine in a snappy manner that shows much skill and practice."

In November of 1925, Ann and Charles would take a bold gamble. They joined forces with Carlo and Marie Stefanik, a Czech illusion team, to form "The Stefanik and Kenyon Transcontinental Magicians Company." Before Charles met Ann, he and Carlo had worked together before in 1922 during a tour of South America. Upon their return, they had reported that their mystery show would soon be touring American vaudeville. Now three years later, the two men decided to combine Stefanik's original illusions with Ann's pasteboard skills. They announced the partnership in *Billboard*, boasting that the show would move on a three-ton truck, two sedans and a roadster. In addition to a calliope, they promised the following illusions: Venetian Fountain, Birth of the Butterfly, the Girl in the Moon, Disappearance of the Doves, and Levitation of a Dog, all which were Stefanik's original creations. When Ann performed her card and coin manipulations, she would be billed as the only woman doing this type of act. Ads also promised that "Madame Kenyon appears in one of her greatest numbers, when, with her mysterious horse, she confounds the senses of the audience." It's not clear what this part of the act was, but it fit with Charles' equestrian background.

Newspaper ads boasted a "cast of 14 people." The show would also feature Marie Stefanik as a lady escape artist, performing aerial straight-jacket escapes a la Houdini to generate buzz for the show. During that inaugural month, the show toured several small Pennsylvania towns: Hughesville, Muncy, Watsontown, Milton, and Mount Carmel. In Williamsport they caught the show of Harry Blackstone, now the leading rival to Thurston and Houdini. After the performance, the always-social Blackstone entertained the Stefanik and Kenyon Company at a luncheon. Later, he and Carlo talked magic into the wee hours of the night. Stefanik had been in vaudeville for a while, but he surely wanted

to pick Harry's brain on how to manage an illusion show in the US. Or he may have already been looking for a buyer.

In late January 1926, *Billboard* announced that Stefanik and Kenyon had split, only two months into the partnership. Charles and Ann resumed their tours of small towns, and Stefanik and Marie returned to vaudeville as a single act. He sold five illusions to a "prominent magician" (was it Blackstone?), and that was the end of the Transcontinental Magicians Company, which seemingly never made it out of Pennsylvania. Other than the daunting struggles of touring an illusion show, the reason for the breakup is unknown. At the very least, Ann Kenyon got a taste of a wider variety of effects, including the type of illusions that the reigning Queen of Magic, Adelaide Herrmann, was known for. One was Noah's Ark, which Alexander Herrmann had performed, and which his widow was still featuring in her vaudeville show (using, incidentally, apparatus redesigned for her by Carlo Stefanik). No doubt the young card manipulator came to appreciate the "packs small, plays big" aspect of her own act and made a point of stressing in later interviews that she did not use mechanical apparatus.

BURNSIDE POST OPERA HOUSE

Friday and Saturday, Dec. 4th and 5th

Stefanik and Kenyon

Magicians

See Ann Kenyon in Coin and Card Manipulation. See "Noah's Ark," the Wonder of the Century.

Three Part Show

With Cast of 14 People

Evening Prices—25c, 50c and 83c.

Children's Matinee Saturday at 2:30,
15c, 25c and 50c

CHART AT ZIMMERMAN'S



Ann Kenyon continued to be a draw, playing clubs, parties, and motion picture theatres – those “presentation houses” that featured live entertainment as a prelude to the film. At one civic club in Mahanoy City, her show raised over \$700 for the organization. Business was so good in fact that she and Charles decided not to take their cookhouse on the road in 1926 until fair season had begun. She reported to the *Billboard* that “there are quite a number of magicians in and around Harrisburg,” and that competition possibly explains why she and Charles set their sights on the South, announcing a tour of Virginia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas.

That route eventually included Jacksonville, Florida, where Ann performed at a string of events for the Elks Lodge, the Yacht Club, and so on. She even did magic at a Christmas party for children sponsored by the Salvation Army. She and Charles soon joined the famed Johnny J. Jones Exposition during the 1926/1927 winter season, doing magic in the side show. From there they shifted to the Corry Shows, during an era when performers and concession operators switched shows constantly from season to season. But the seed had been planted by this southern tour. From here on out, the Kenyons would work increasingly out of the South, especially in and around Atlanta, Georgia.

In January 1929, *Linking Ring* editor W.W. Durbin gave a full page in the magazine to reprinting a testimonial letter Ann had received from the American Red Cross. In a show she gave at the Veterans’ Hospital in Atlanta the previous December, she had entertained a ward full of injured World War I vets, who enjoyed the show so much that they reportedly returned to their rooms and tried to act out some of the tricks to show the more severely injured men. The Red Cross director raved about the show, and reprinting the letter provided good publicity both for the Kenyons and the IBM, which Ann had joined



Charles Kenyon circa 1927. (from The Linking Ring)

in 1927. In February 1929, Durbin printed a brief profile, describing how Ann got into magic and stating that “she has a style peculiarly her own in that she does not try to copy other magicians but tries to do things differently.”

Sometime during 1929, Charles and Ann joined Sunshine Exposition Shows, playing states in the Southeast. In December, *Billboard* printed a photograph of Ann with the couple’s Bumper Concession, called “one of the most abundantly and neatly flashed emporiums of its kind.” Ann is shown on the carnival midway in a booth loaded with novelties and souvenirs. A “Bumper Concession” was a gambling game using a chrome bumper car about the size of a roller skate. The object was to push the car with considerable force to bounce back and forth along a short, straight track with bumpers at each end. When the car stopped, a pointer on the side of the car indicated one of a series of numbers painted along the track, corresponding to the prize that had been won. The Kenyons also had a “Pitch-till-you-win” game, in which customers got multiple tries throwing at a target for prizes.

During the early 30s, Charles and Ann worked carnivals constantly during the season, touring with various outfits such as the Lee Amusement Company, the Mitchell Amusement Company and so on. Whenever the pair played Atlanta, members of the Gate City IBM Ring went to see them. On one such occasion in 1931, the Ring put on a show in one of the carnival tents, with all members, including Ann, performing a trick. These carny tours also gave Ann chances to perform school shows and hospital visits in the towns where the carnival was playing.

Her highest-profile charity show happened in Georgia in November 1932, when she performed at the Warm Springs Institute. She was part of the Founder’s Day program. Franklin D. Roosevelt had just been elected President a few weeks earlier, and he was making his first appearance at his Georgia home after the election. According to *The Polio Chronicle*, a newsletter published by the Institute, Ann performed a few days after Thanksgiving: “Mystifying tricks of magic were featured in the performance given by Miss Ann Kenyon Sunday afternoon, November 28, at the Foundation Playhouse. The show was greatly enjoyed by the patients and residents.” But Roosevelt likely did not see the magic show. *The Polio Chronicle* did not mention that he was in attendance that particular evening, and Ann did not send press releases to the magazines touting an appearance before the President-elect, as any professional would do. Nonetheless, it was an important engagement.

The last reference I have found to the Kenyons as an active show business couple appears in *Billboard* in September 1933: "Charles and Ann Kenyon are among the first carnival people to join the NRA and are proudly displaying the cards in their concessions." And on that note, they disappear from the scene. No more references to magic performances or carnival appearances. Four years later, *Billboard* reported the death of Charles W. Kenyon, "carnival cookhouse operator and concessioner," on December 10, 1937 in Phenix City, Alabama after a lingering illness. He had lived there for three years and was survived by his wife Ann and a son, Henry, from a previous marriage. Kenyon was buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Ann Kenyon was 34 years old when her husband died. She dropped out of magic and carnival life and eventually settled in Algood, Tennessee, where she worked as a nurse at the Master's Rest Home. She never remarried and had no children. The end came on June 13, 1979, when she was 76. Her brief obituary described her as a native of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and the widow of Charles Kenyon, but it said nothing about her eight-year adventure as a magician and carny. Her death was not reported in the magic press, either. While her picture appeared in the 1927 IBM Convention program on a page showing "Our IBM Lady Members," she didn't perform at that, or any, national convention. That might have brought her to wider attention and enabled the recognition that her skills seem to have deserved. Since no detailed description of her act survives, we don't actually know the extent of her card skills – only her palming was singled out for mention. But she occupies an interesting place in the story of women in magic. She started in magic as Adelaide Herrmann was winding down and as Dell O'Dell was soon to transition from a vaudeville strong-woman to a burlesque magician with the ice act. Had Ann Kenyon stuck with it, we can only wonder where a career in magic would have taken her.

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